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Kathy Dunne

The University of Montana

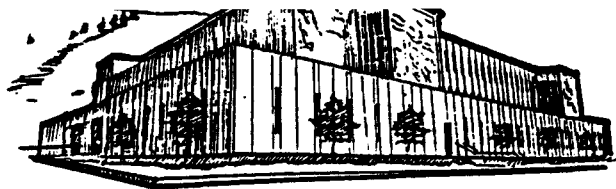
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University of
Montana

Male Narrative Night at the Movies

Poems by
Kathy Dunne

B.A., University of Montana
1987

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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A special thanks to my family
and a little black seatbelt
for making it possible for me to complete this degree

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Male Narrative Night at the Movies

Male Narrative Night at the Movies

We can be doctors now
and Airforce pilots and undercover cops.
We have a place even in the male narratives.
If they slam us against the wall
of our neurosurgery office and kiss us, remember,
it's what we wanted. We also want
military men to call us
the best damn babe in the air
and despite our Ph.D's we want
to be saved from evil by a handsome highschool dropout.

Let us be the centerpiece of every cop-thriller-suspense-
psycho-adventure in the universe.
Let us be rescued, hit, comforted,
and adored. Let our breasts shine
over the tops of cashmere dresses and torn blouses.
Let our legs glint like plastic props,
running from the bad guys to the good guys.

In the dark of the movie theater
our lives have a fine, neat closure.
As Milk Duds roll lazily down
the whole length of the aisle,
we are enclosed every two hours.
He returns to the force, the cartel,
the P.I. business, wallstreet or the university and
we've found a man.
The prince's life goes on in the smooth
running of his kingdom, and the last page closes
on Cinderella with "happily ever after."

Little girls, you can be doctors now
but with your soft days
of dolls in the playhouse and
pink bikes on the lawn,
you cannot be stories.

Altar

Even an altar boy
drunk on sacrificial wine
can lay his hand on the wood.
Some line smudged in the King James' version
assures him of this.
It is the priest's duty to approach
the raised wooden table. His duty
to keep the words straight
and women's hands from it.
The cross thumps between his breasts
as he steers bold girls from the gold ropes
ringing Christ's place.
But after the mass and hum of voices,
a woman comes with vacuum in hand.
Before empty high-backed pews,
she stoops to a three-pronged outlet,
the call for God's permission
loud and electric.

House of Leaves

There are three little girls with dolls
playing in square rooms, walls
of leaves. Two inch high
orange and yellow walls that outline squares
on the still green grass.
The kitchen and bedrooms are divided
and perfect, doorways swept clear to the lawn.

Three little girls in their houses
dressing dolls in separate rooms. Neighbors
borrowing a cup of imaginary sugar, mindful
of using the doorways. I remember
it was a great sin to step in the wrong place,
to step on someone's bedroom wall.

The boys would sometimes shuffle by
and wreck one of our perfect houses,
floorplans of our dreamed-of lives.
Ruined, our mommy lives of perfect babies
that never cried. Lives void of real boys
but each house with a daddy
who would kiss us, kiss the baby
on his way out the door to work,
work he was always at, so we could play peacefully
and not have to cook so much.

I remember those lines of leaves
defining my house. I must have played
like the others with my smiling doll--
before I read about the other stories in the world
before I figured out that
daddy would be a boy like those neighborhood boys,
before I knew I could spend a lifetime
sweeping up the leaves,
repairing the walls of my house.

Pre-school

Crouched in miniature chairs,
my composition students
squirm in this pre-school, stare
at blank sheets,
their essays on childhood memories
contained by twelve years of dissected
sentences, five paragraph essays.

Cross-legged on the floor
the pre-school students
are learning lessons from posters.
The teacher's voice floats down to them
two octaves higher than the human voice.
"This is a construction worker."
He looks like Mr. Green Jeans.
"This is a nurse."
A blonde Mary Tyler Moore.
A girl named Kira walks in late
asks me, a stranger, to pin on her nametag.
"I'm late for school."
She looks into my face
to see what that means.
"I'm late for school sometimes too, Kira."
She nods her energetic head.

My student's pens are still
stuck in the silver binding
of their notebooks. I wonder
how they forgot the day
they cracked the alphabet,
and the world hung in front of them
shiny and whole.

I hear that voice float down,
"Zip up your lip, Kira,
and throw away the key."

Boy

1.

A five-year-old is not afraid of anything,
the museum visitors know from his cowboy boots,
hands in pockets, brave talk
in front of Tyrannasaurus Rex.

Rex is nearly life sized, electric
eyeballs rolling around, the little arms
flapping in useless warning, its head
tilting side to side.

The great jaw opens slowly, the click
of the teeth the plaque says are sharp
as steak knives, knives hovering over
a dinner plate and then the dinosaur
screams, snaps the boy back,
hands flapping at his sides he tries to
calm himself, looks around at everyone
behind him. His baby brother
backed into the information stand
excited and still not speaking English
in his happy fear.

2.

And the two boys were rescued up through the manhole.
A circle of hands, of heads circling the hole
looking down, searching. A fireman's hat, a policeman,
a deli clerk. The intensity, the danger, electric
and spreading through the bystanders, their talk
alive like gossip, peppered with "God" and "how terrible."
The very thrill of the rescue at hand. The boys now
crowning
up through the hole, breaking into the daylight. The
serious
adventure, the importance of it, they understand through the
men's hands. They stand surrounded, their heads tilted down
to the black pavement, shaking in the confused, fearful
modesty of their bodies, beginning now to wear an angle of
importance. Two shy boys in a rescue parade needing
a near miss day to bring on the worry of the crowd,
needing danger to be worthy of the honor, firetrucks,
sirens,
police cars and reporters saying, "we were afraid of losing
you."

3.

"Who cares if he has training wheels, he still can play."
Mostly they are mean to each other.
Sometimes a basic meanness: "cannot,"
"stupid," or the uneventful push or
white tennis shoe tripping. Sometimes

they show some polish, a sophisticated
battle of cowboys and Indians
or a media storm of Marines with the
dark kids playing Iraqis.

The battle lines are drawn over sandboxes
where mudpies are made or over grassy spots
where cheers are practiced. The subtle meanness
in the sandy kitchen is new to them. Guns drawn
they sheer through the places where there is
one girl out, where insults are softly handed out,
and no one bleeds on the outside.

None of them have learned the joys of true betrayal,
the mean intent of the written language.

Meanness, like sex roles,
is a crude thing in the hands of these children.
They are mindful of both, wielding them
like still blunt tools.

He Says, "A Toast!"

The champagne hesitates
in crystal raised to the moment.
"The bride is a beauty."
Her mother nods,
Mindfully modest of the genes she arranged.
Two groomsmen wonder
if she is any good in bed.
"The groom is
one helluva guy."
The bride smiles;
She is now Mrs. One Helluva Guy.
Two groomsmen slap each other's backs.
The groom's mother glares at them.
"They are truly a great couple."
The old ladies sigh and an aunt
on the bride's side bets
they won't make it a year.
"May your love last as long
as your wedding rings."

Double Yuppie Sonnet

I was just remembering David and me taking the Saab in.
 If it were a small repair, no charge, we having been
 loyal customers since we bought the Saab.
 We'd go to Starbuck's and get two lattes
 and bring a pound of Vienesse blend coffee
 for the mechanics to savor in their lobby.
 Then we would fight traffic to Larry's Market,
 wait for the valet and take our ticket.
 We'd shop for cilantro, ricotta, cannoli shells,
 two salmon steaks, a chardonnay chilled well.
 at home David would cook and I would set the linen,
 crystal, delicate china that shined.
 We talked, I suppose, of the working week past,
 the work ahead or our dogs or the last
 piece we needed to complete the silver or the livingroom.
 Did I say more than, "good food?"
 Did I surprise him that night I said I was leaving?
 Maybe I didn't talk, all those days and evenings.
 Didn't say the latte life was killing me,
 never reading anything bigger than Esquire Magazine.
 Didn't say, "I'm a meal of cotton candy, and it rains in
 Seattle.
 I've let myself go, there's nothing after
 the dinner is over, the Saab is fixed, we've gone to bed."
 My first date after the divorce was an old boyfriend
 who said that I had taken care, I looked fine.
 I'd had the proper coffee, valet parking, endive,
 but nothing stopped the wanting for a better life
 or stops the wondering now if I told David any of this.

Dinner Alone

Saw two women
fighting in a restaurant tonight,
one's voice sharp enough
to be heard over the roar
of cutlery.

I squirmed voiceless
as an earthworm
whose tunnel is filling with rain
faster than it can crawl.

I hum over my fork,
but I can still hear that voice,
that answering cower.
I imagine the home they share--
the coatrack near the door,
the three holes behind every picture
with only one the right place
for a nail.

I see the battle of the flatwear
when she used a knife
as a screwdriver and hear
the Bon bill and the silent dinner story.
I feel the airy bruises
down the length of her body
from not being held,
sense the rule about
the middle of the bed
being left empty.
I see their car
and who drives it, their life
and who lives it.

I know
how to put a stick
in the bicycle spokes of its movement
and stop it dead.

God Said To Take What You Want And Pay For It

Not in my Bible exactly,
at least not in the one I had for Sunday School--
my name in gold letters because I had
memorized the books of the Bible:
Leviticus, Deuteronomy, a list
like the ingredients on a Coke can.
But in the Bible that writes itself
as my life goes along, this divine equity
is in Genesis. God wants me
to take heart and pay for my optimism.
He wants me to take a spouse, a break, my temperature,
and when the walnut-hued collection plate
rounds that pew corner, he wants me
to give my half of the house, another year of work
before vacation, and my health.
Still, he is the mild God
of my New Testament youth. If I had nothing,
he would ask for nothing, but I am blessed.
I am alive, and I tithe what I owe
in taxes, in the aging of my body,
in childless years, in study, in church.

A Sonnet for Quiet Years

I buy a jug of wine and have a glass.
I take a bath, it's dull I know to spend
my latter twenties shriveled in the tub.
Sinatra sings to me across the years
and tells me he for certain won't forget
the way I look tonight. I know that Frank
at eighty still does not enjoy the tub
alone. I should be mating rapidly
at large and squishing these two breasts in push-up
bras, at least I should say yes just once
or twice to not forget the purpose of
my parts. But I have come to have a certain
theory: I give myself to Frank and no one else,
and when he dies he'll leave me more
than money; I'll have the quiet years I spent alone.

Soap Opera Sonnet

She said she really didn't love him, she
was out to get his wife's obscene amount
of money. Who could guess the vasectomy
had not taken, and who could guess the slouch
would leave for Borneo the day the test
came back although the nurse had switched the vials
and charming Doctor Chris before the sex
change had really fathered the bastard child,
and Sue who doesn't know is struck with grief
when flames above the hills of Borneo
are linked to Tim's untimely death but he,
the poor amnesia stricken man is whole.

Thank God he lives now Sue can end her sorrow.

I'll dust the tube, can't wait until tomorrow.

The Uptown Cafe'

In the Uptown Cafe' everything
is the color of coffee.
A round table sits one level up,
reserved for the salesmen
who come each day for breakfast.
I sit with hard bacon
on my plate trying to guess
the ages of five polyester ties.
They'll ignore a girl like me,
unless my legs show
or I develop cleavage
from the hashbrowns.
I'm sure they all sell shoes,
work hard for a double-wide trailer
to fit their families in.
I shouldn't be surprised,
listening in on their confessions,
but my tired salesmen are debating the merits
of their BMW's and their Benzes.

In the Seattle espresso bars,
I expected confessions of sleek living
from slim-suited men,
from women who moved in heels
and read the Journal
on granite countertops.
I waited to hear of t.v.s in bathrooms, Volvo wagons,
Louis Vitton checkbook covers, and grocery stores
with wine stewards. I imagined they held
powerful bank jobs,
one-man art shows,
the means to early retirement.
They couldn't sell underwear or
manage the Kmart Photo Center.
Under the artful glow of neon coffee cups
the suits looked too good.

Still Life

I once knew a man who could only write
while drinking coffee and chain smoking.
A romantic writer,
I can see him in a booth at Butterfly Herbs.
His hands shake from caffeine,
but his cigarette is steady.
He has black hair,
a little wavy and at the back of his neck,
a triangle of silver hair
he had even as a child. He wears
a white pirate shirt with billowing sleeves,
long rips over each elbow,
and a black vest. A musty black vest
with rough cotton in front, silk in back
and a small silver buckle, the old cloth
filled with the warm slight life of him.

He dreams over his coffee stained notebook,
his poem, that always becomes a song
he hums and disturbs the smokey air with.
He longs for a woman from his writing,
a woman mysterious and unsmiling in gauzy scarves.
Her fine white skin
pearls in his imagination,
her thin paper life unfolds until
someone speaks to him,
and he smiles brightly, boyishly at real flesh,
at the world outside his coffee cup, cigarette.
He needs a woman already created, freckled perhaps,
dressed for the weather.
A woman to hold him
and make his dental appointments,
a woman for half of his attention.

Confessions of the Non-P.C.*

We get confused about whether we should leave the metal cap on or off of the spaghetti jar when we recycle it, so we throw it away. We use the word "we." On mornings when we are running late and are really tired and need a cup of coffee and stop at a mini-mart we drink out of styrofoam cups. We wonder if we should call Indians, "Native Americans" and Blacks, "African Americans" and then say, "Indian" and "Black." We don't understand drumming or how men can really say they are feminist, and there are those among us who subscribe to Reader's Digest. O.K. and sometimes listen to Paul Harvey. We can't tell if our make-up has been tested on little pink rabbits or not. We wear make-up. We can't tell if our tuna is just tuna or tuna and dolphin, and if we could tell could we eat the tuna that's just tuna? We eat tuna. We eat beef and we like it. We eat veal, but those among us who heard about the baby cows hung in those slings and fed antibiotics, feel bad about it. We're not sure why eating at McDonald's feeds the ugly specter of capitalism. We just like Big Macs. We don't know what phosphates are and read the soap labels to determine what it will smell like. Did we mention that we drive? We drive to work. We drive to the store. We drive to the end of the driveway. Our mail boxes are there. We own bicycles. Is that a confession? Our bicycles are in our garages. We don't know what performance art is. We saw it once and we don't know why it's art. We don't know anything about NEA grants so there's no need to hash that out. We might be Republicans. We might be Democrats. We don't vote. We read the most popular newspaper in town, and we think it a waste of paper to have an independent one. We never read poetry. We read poetry and don't get it. We read greeting cards as poetry. We read bad P.C. poetry that has a shelf life of two days because it doesn't contain any preservatives.

*Politically
Correct

Styrofoam

"Even 500 years from now, that foam cup that held your
coffee this morning might be sitting on the Earth's
surface."

from 50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth

I am reassured, drinking coffee
from this styrofoam cup.
I have no children or good works
to carry my name past
the life of my heart muscle or bones.
This white cup will live
500 years after my lipstick print
has washed off. I will make
this styrofoam cup my poem.
After the paper ones are gone,
this one will last.
Small fish will take it in,
my poem will lift them
buoyant and still alive, floating
by the lake's edge
where my footprints
have already disappeared.

Her Garden

Her Garden

The roses stood perfectly
in their chilly summer rows,
a three-month well mannered performance
my mother applauded.
I could see that they smelled good even then,
but there was a dryness
in their polite minding.

I would stand with white sneakers
at the edge of the rectangular bed
and admire the math
of each red blossom,
the petals layered from inside
with overlapping care and precision.
The pain was simplified
by the quickness of the waxy thorns,
when I felt my way into the fragrant maze.

The tiger lilies and lemon lilies
bloomed for me.
One patch of garden,
shaded and ignored,
moved by its own pattern.
Orange freckled tiger lilies grew
into lemon-yellow ones,
and the children went wild
in the colors of a sunrise
burning over a mountain.

Lilith

I.

Our new skin damp and fresh,
Adam and I locked fingers and entered our garden.
Born together, our early time passed
in the silver-grey haze before dawn
and the fire of sunsets.

We would carry ripe tomatoes and the green furred
leaves of endive under the shade of trees,
and Adam would pile the red bodies and leafy fans,
biting first into the juice and seed,
curling leaves onto the flat of his tongue and
then set our ripe dinner in front of me.

In the warm dark furrows of the earth,
Adam walked with new determination
a slightest step ahead of me
until our hands dropped away.

I walked alone more, the springing grasses
damp between my toes,
each blade singly pressed into the curves of my feet.
Adam wouldn't take the bright carrots I brought back,
the nasturtiums or my hand.
His voice moved alone in the night air.
One early dawn I stopped walking circles in the garden
and walked a straight path out.

For years I wandered,
slipping across the new land. I lived
cold dawns over the lines of a desert,
mossy bogs and the mud of a warm river.
I chased the shadow of herons
and felt the lift of crisp blue wings,
rested on bear grass
and watched lightning crack on the horizon.
I slept in the hard branches of maple,
the green of sun through leaves
colored my skin, the dark nights cooled it.
I moved steadily over the land
until the day I slipped up a gnarled tree
in the garden I knew, my body
iridescent, my skin damp
and fresh in a thousand shades of green,
scales twisting in the sun.

Questions in Summertime

Could you love my face and not my eyebrows?
Think the skin above my cheekbones
too full or too drawn, yet want
to hold my face in your hands and love me?
Could you stop at the skin between my breasts
and wish it were the color of a peach
or slim ripe pear, yet still
make love to the whole of me?
How can my whole be dissected
into the most loveable degrees,
the least understood degrees,
each wedge a new and different
old shade of me, translucent
and jelly lavender or hard
as the flesh of a cold apple?
To me, each shade is familiar,
in the morning, in the summer's day
that will never end and does.
It is the yard I grew up in and the speckled
green dragonfly that flapped
above my wiper blade as I drove,
the one sheen of clear color,
the one remaining wing.
How can you put your mouth
to the skin of a cold apple
without seeing the wings of the dragonfly
stopped in its mating, glistening
on the hard glass of a window?

Winter Bird on Flathead Lake

We sink into this quilt,
can't tell the worn flannel
from our own skin.
A Saturday making love
in front of a picture window,
the lake our only witness.
We look up from the tea, from the dog--
a winter bird is flying
across our weekend lake.
In its path the lake feathers,
and the cool heavy air
holds it inches
above the flat blue water.
We are held against
the skin of this lake.
We rest in the bird's light bones
filled with the energy of air.
We live in its thick red muscle
powering the soft white filament
of wings.

Indecision

I look at this fire,
this red dog, this blond man
asleep on the couch. The hours ahead,
morning, hammering out
this life of mine
or moving in the fluidity of it.

I look out at the winter lake and see
the flying machines of birds.
The constant balancing,
corrections they perform with each breath-
the calculated dip,
the piercing line in the water
for the luminous insect,
the false important V
they collect, divide up, navigate in
always in even numbers,
mating for the sheer habit
of populating a world of birds.

But a fish can tip the balance,
a meal lost in the dizzying excitement
of regaining flight.
And the wind can surprise them sometimes,
the unimportant summer wind
that ruffles their warm feathers,
disturbs their smooth white direction.

You said that the mass of Canada Geese
flicking steadily towards us on the water
would be evenly numbered.
We counted not twenty-six but twenty-five.
They carried a widower, I think,
with his irrational,
against the needs of the world urge
to mate for life.

Boundaries

I peel back the sweet
darkness of your skin
and climb inside.
Your chest seals around me,
seamless as a fingertip
in a pool of water.
I stand inside the warm waves
of your blood, padded
by burgundy kidneys and the shining
pink of your stomach and lungs.
I breathe in
the skittering pearls of air
from the webs of your arteries.
I float
with the rhythm of cells dying
and dividing.
I feel your heart
beat against my throat.

I wonder if the lines on my hands,
the crease behind my knees,
will blur in your warmth,
if I'll lose the boundaries
of my own skin
or stay inside you
like the wholeness of an organ afloat.

Comfort

Say it slow
he's southern
southern slow
like coffee
too hot to drink
spinning some with sugar.

I watch his wide brown hand
and want
this stranger.

He laughs slowly
releases
a white line of reluctant
teeth, late for this
joke, early for the next.

I hear three syllables
in "K"
when he calls.

He moves like
warm water
deliberate
with his strength.
He is on time
with his muscle and bone.

I wait to dance with him
and then
hesitate.

He was Fondling Himself

in the library
between the stacks and staring at me.
He had circled the rows of books
appearing in one aisle, then another,
a picture book held in his hands.
Something in the intent blankness of his face
made me carefully watch where he was,
where he was moving.
He saw me look down,
his zipper open like a wound.
I saw the pink flesh.
He was kneading the mound of soft skin
slowly, evenly in his hand.
I faced my blank notebook
intent, as if I could read it,
afraid of him and useless
in the shaking fear I felt.
He would touch me-
I looked up at the picture book
now covering his belly, his expressionless eyes on me.
I walked calmly out of the library,
my open backpack and loose books in my arms.
I shuddered in the cold car,
locked the door,
looked over my shoulder
at the blank windows of the library.

The Four B's Restaurant at One in the Morning

Sometimes after sex
it's better to take yourself out for breakfast
than to wait for a stranger to ask.
Next to me
the gritty drunk can't listen
so I spend another morning
writing the stories of my vagina,
the jokes of my breasts.

When my husband cooked here,
I was twenty-one.
"Poor students," my mother-in-law said,
"living in a honeymoon cottage"
with two dogs, illegal mushrooms
in the vegetable crisper.
It was the golden retriever
I held at night
waiting for six a.m. and the smell of french fries
on my husband's skin.
I'd ask him to hold me,
but when the dog jumped down
the bed got cold.

When I was twenty-five
not even the dog could warm me.
I learned
my husband hadn't been saving himself
for marriage.
I took a suitcase and the name of a woman with me.

I'm here now for the coffee
or the smell of fried food.
The drunk is asleep or dead,
but I'm not dancing on any graves
just sitting in my own skin,
aching in the comfort of it.

Night Club

The dusty curtain parts; I am sheathed in satin.
I hear sparse applause lift through the dark.
I lean back into the ebony curve
of the piano, ivory keys blurring in the smoke.
I wait for the heavy music to slow
and in a second's breath, I begin the blues.

I wind myself slowly around the blues,
someone's life of loss, silky as satin.
It moves through the room, weighty, slow,
calms with the promise of an evening's dark.
It carries the sharp, fresh bite of smoke
across closed faces, up to the ceiling's curve.

I smooth down the slick black curve
of my gown, alight in the spotlight's blues.
I move in a blue net of lights and smoke,
my skin sheened in sweat like satin.
The heavy warmth hangs in the dark
sparks from iced bourbon, burning sharp and slow.

I lean away from the piano, slow
the pace of my voice, sleepy in the curve
of a blues story in the dark,
the dark of a woman singing the blues,
held upright by the stays of satin
and the grey swirling of smoke.

The piano hums, clouds like smoke
the story I sing as if blue were always slow.
The faces in the room pool like satin.
The tables, chairs, bend and curve
riding their own wave of the blues,
twisting slowly with a shaky pattern in the dark.

It is too thick and warm this dark.
The only clear breath I take, the smoke
that sends me dizzy into the blues.
My heart, my breath too slow,
I lean on the heavy microphone's silver curve
quiet now, a startled rustle of satin.

I rest heavy in satin, trying for air in this dark.
The piano begins to curve around me like smoke.
I wait for it to slow; I begin the blues.

Night Sestina

I awake in the sharp white linen
cooled in the moon's rain of milky light.
The colorless glow of my skin
pools between the sheets and your teeth
shine in what has not been done.

I wonder what can be done
to warm again the thinness of linen.
The slick smile your teeth
bare to me in this cooling light,
chills the curve of my hips and skin.

You lay your milk white hand heavily on my skin,
and I see in the night's shadows it will be done.
Even the shadows are born of the light
that once flooded the glowing linen
and held us warm in cotton teeth.

Now you snap your jaw to hear your teeth
cut across your tongue of shadowed skin.
The drop of blood heats a circle of linen,
I spread my thigh across to have it done,
as you handle, as you position my skin
and enter me sharp against the linen.

You struggle, held by teeth, and I know you are done.
My face milk again with the light on my skin,
your leaving, useless, as I lie back on the linen.

Garden Bed

"It's gonna hurt now...anything dead coming back to life hurts." Toni Morrison

I haven't baked a cookie in two years
 or grown flowers or let a man in my body
 I let myself love.
 After my divorce, some little door
 inside of me closed. A click
 and no more light came in.
 I made friendly acquaintances
 and straight "A's" in graduate school.
 I made dates, made my
 single bed every morning
 and lay in it every night. I was
 a perfectly held in place woman,
 a living version of a librarian's bun of hair,
 calmly devouring books and writing sex poetry
 in the measured lines of a sestina.
 Once a week the rhythm was broken,
 my hair across the sheets
 a floral pillow case in my mouth, wet and salty.

Two springs later, its blooms have faded.
 I stand over the garden bed,
 still empty in March, and envision
 the planting of sweet peas.
 I put the package of seeds
 in my grocery basket, place them
 on top of chocolate chips, baking powder, flour.
 In April, May or June
 I press my thumb into the warming soil,
 roll a tan pod into the opening ground,
 cover it and wait without fear. I
 water it and keep shade from falling across it.
 And when the curly sprouts appear
 and climb with shiny leaves and nestle
 with soft two petaled flowers, I
 hold a mass of violet and red and
 white and smell the sweet heat of sugar,
 and the tears I cry
 won't blur the red and purple sweetness
 down the length of my arms
 into the ground again.

The Proposal

All the way up the road,
grey washboard skidding side to
side, we sit packed in the
warmth of the car.
The seatbelts lie across us like the
sweet ginger ribbon holding the
heart of a white-silver sushi together.
In the plastic bright
sheen of the headlights we
catch the white flag of a
deer's tail moving from our light.
Later, this will be the
night you built a fire and I
waited on a grey couch. The night I
hooked my fingers inside your
mouth as if to free the hardness of a
red sharp apple peel stuck and
cutting there. As if I had taken
two long lean fingers and
slid them down the
length of your throat, my
index finger slipping against the
apple's soft meat, my fingernails
filled with the pithy white.
Your large hands
folded my shoulders in
my back hunched like an
old woman as I searched inside you.
The hard red crust of the apple peel
catching against my finger, a
paper cut that bled down the
pink of your throat. I pulled the peel
whole from your throat.
Three silken strands from your mouth,
umbilical cords,
detached as I lifted it over the mossy
softness of your tongue
as if you'd said we'll marry.

Sparrows

-

Sparrows

They're not traffic birds,
their flight too low,
a straight line even across highways.
Roads, fields, nothing changes

the nature of their flying, low
and sharp. Evolution should have forced
a more flexible pattern, a change,
slight and steady over one hundred years of cars.

But each day I am forced
to finely balance my steering,
sparing the oncoming cars,
sparing the small birds.

One, my steering
could not spare. At my side
it dully thudded into the car. The bird
landing, a small brown ball in the street.

I drove to the side
of the road, afraid to see it.
I ran shakily down the street
relieved that it was gone,

looked once along the gutter, then saw it.
Its feathers puffed, it crouched,
the focus of its eyes gone,
its breathing as quick and sharp as its flight.

The cars blurred by and I crouched,
my hands large and brutal
next to its hollow bones of flight.
I could not pick it up.

As if others would be less brutal,
I ran from house to house
asking at each door until I gave up.
I walked back down the sidewalk

and along the busy grey highway,
I found no bird.

Pigeon

I eat my tuna sandwich
and wait for the one-legged pigeon.
Two-legged really, one tied
with aqua clear fishing line
to its soft grey belly.
I bring my squeaky scissors
and chase it around the park a bit.
One fold in its brain pan
only room for "squeak,"
"squeak."

One leg and a little wing,
it circles the tree, crosses
the mossy lawn
as my tuna warms on the bench.

I imagine being a better bird than this.
My shadow falls quickly
across the lawn,
lightly over the white bench. Sandwich
in two red claws, I work
hard until I hit an airstream
and coast.
I once ate the eye of a pirate
washed up plumply
on a beechwood shore.
I flew behind the combine and waited
for a piece of deer
or hedgehog.
I flew up from the ashes and moved
over dull waters
looking for an olive branch.

To this one-legged pigeon,
I bring no peace
only get tired and go back
to eat my dry lunch.
The one-legged pigeon moves closer
now that I've stopped trying to help it.
The swan that fluttered
the thighs of Leda
must have thought more clearly
than the God of Pigeons.

Black and slick in this midnight
water waiting--
I see her skin
her gown through the trees.

Her night eyes clear now.
She kneels
on the heavy sand and pulls
each white fingertip
through the lake
to bring me to her.
There is no escape
from the sweet curve of my neck.

My Grandmother Goes Crazy in the Early Fall

It twists so dark, so strange
the sun falls fast and deep,
some endings I can't change.

The wind blows down the range
stirring the bitter wheat
it twists so dark, so strange.

The time has been arranged
to cleanse with bitter heat
some endings I can't change.

I hear escaping trains
the whistle, shhhh, the beat
it twists so dark, so strange.

My mother, myself, my grain
in this final harvest repeat
some endings I can't change.

This cold night holds no pain
as I wait for needles of sleep.
It twists so dark, so strange,
some endings I can't change.

To the Exterminator

They crawl under the sliding glass doors
and under the window, walk around
on the glass and die on the sills.
These beetles haven't even got a name,
aren't pretty, just greenish-brownish.
They can fly but don't. I saw one
open its wings wide, the only one
desperate to get anywhere—
I didn't see what happened to it.
It's a bad life even for a bug. Ants
lift ten times their body weight,
work non-stop for a few days and croak.
At least they get out, have something to do, work
shoulder to shoulder with other ants.
Maybe these bugs live someplace else
and only come here their last few hours.
Maybe they pace in my window contemplating
the juicy adventures of their youth,
the ripe females, handsome shelled males,
their children maybe or their glorious deeds
chewing down chickweed or
downing the flower of beargrass.
Maybe they pace to say goodbye
to grandchildren, great-grandchildren, faithful
spouses they leave behind or hurry on to meet.
Sometimes when they stop pacing, I imagine
they aren't stopped cold in the knowledge
that their lives are only one short day long,
they're only remembering a friendly neighbor back home
or wondering where that first youthful love is right now.
Then they stop and a small piece of wing unfolds
and they hang, the small green shell empty, beginning
the drying and curling until it drops, they always drop
though I have never seen one do it,
I see them alive and then dead,
clustered together on the white sill
in a community they never seemed to have
alone on the window pane.

Dysdiadokokinesis*

Small white buttons pearl,
harshly jerk and scatter
to the wooden floor
or dull linoleum, small white heads,
threads dangling from them like roots.

Tea spatters in sea storms
over the cusp of china,
filigreed floral drowned poppies
or moss roses, cabbage roses,
or forget-me-nots, the silver rimmed saucer
deluged in a tannin waterfall.

A lead line or curve of ink
shaken to distraction, upends words
sometimes barely horizontal
across the page. Language lost
and shaken, dazed and large,
illegible.

Hands,
tapered fingers, square
or long and thin like a keel
of a thin boat sailing over
the water's skin, the light
balance of the strokes, the slow, desperate,
delicate unbuttoning of pearls, the washing
of the water's flowers,
the bloom of fineness faded.

*The loss of fine movement of the hands.

Northern Lake

1.
I plumb its depths,
this dark and ancient lake,
my white hand black
in its bottomless waters,
the day's light lost
in shadowy beams beneath
the sharpness of its cold.
Slick edged bones of pike,
of salmon, nest in its
eternal heavy breath,
ancient soft sores
in the hard history of this lake.

2.
One moment a fin shifts
in this sandless place.
It asks for its God or its Dragonfly,
returns to the heavy air it breathes.

3.
I remember a March day,
four old men carried
my Grandfather's casket,
their stiff and stooping bodies
barely enough to lift one.
They set him on the thawing soil
and stood still bent.
A flag like blue smoke, red fire
hung over the ebony box.
The last old man
crisp in suit and hollow bones
turned to my Grandmother,
flag in thin-veined hands, and fell
across the hard March lawn
on two soft knees
then white forearm and palm
and liverspotted forehead.

4.
The wind sprays
dusty green and yellow needles
to the shifting water's edge.
A mallard skirts the shore,
its surreal green
temporary warmth here.

5.
Fir trees and heavy needled spruce

stand like green stone crosses
filtering a golden sun
whose journey ends in grey moss soil.
These thin tall trees
shade the dead milk white
of Indian Pipe,
cast the outline of
roughened bark
on tender curls of fern
slow moving in the near dark.

Escher's Birds

They are the same inseparable thing,
a grey blur of pencil lead
linking beaks, tips of wings,
deceiving the eye with the nature of things.
The black and white birds born
of one impulse of flight,
kept whole by the core of grey wing, grey beak.

It is in the greyness they find flight.
The motion of wing, the necessary acceptance
of the black strokes blurring
across the sharp white paper into grey.

No grey birds centered your flight,
only shades of white in your vision.
Valium killed each black bird
new to your eyes. Their waxed,
shiny wings slipped around
in the blue-black of your stomach.
When you walked sleepily into
the clean, cold lake
wet wings clung to your sides and your forehead.
You lay on the water, a bird slick--
oiled and black. Your note
the one white bird left of your flock.

It Was in the Wind

It Was in the Wind

that the cottonwood tree showed itself best,
the green front and silver-backed leaves

whipping in summer storms like paper
money and coins glued back to back.

I had a wooden swing on its heaviest branch.
Pumping my legs like even stitches

over the green fabric of lawn,
I sang every song I knew those summers,

my faltering rhymes when I forgot
the true words, attempts

to close the gap or clear air between
my voice and the murmuring leaves.

My legs would tire, but I would
sing each half-invented song over and over,

the leaves flipping front to back above me
like verbs and adverbs nested together.

A Dream of Vowels and Consonants

Its thin, spindly,
fleshless legs have spun
around my plans and bills.
It stays alive even in the balancing
of my diet and my checkbook.
It its sickliness
my hope is still warmblooded,
vibrating slowly to iambic pentameter,
moving to the mysteries
of free verse
line breaks.

My father reminds me
he fathered a female
who lives in a world of suburban wives
and female corporate executives.
He reminds me
waiters are poets,
I eat too much to be a starving artist.
He's right, I know--
Wish I could
love the exercise of business
or the jockeying of a computer's glow. .
Wish the world paid a poem
the love a poet does.
But still my thin-legged hope
stays with me,
and we dance some
waiting tables to the softness of vowels,
the strengths of consonants.

Portrait

I'm thinking of painting a portrait.
Subject, reality, limits of the medium,
strengths of it.
The ease of the visual,
screaming red of the brushstroke, square,
solidity of square, a triangle, jaw and nose,
sharp eye sockets. I want
to paint a portrait,
and I want the murderous language.
Not the haze of justice
or a poet's struggle with the nature of reality.
I want a language
like a quick, hard-handled paintbrush,
sharp strokes to set up the bones,
jaw cartilage, the steady crispness of ligament,
thick ease of muscle, then
the buttermilk frosting of skin,
as delicate... delicate as if it weren't stretched
over the pounded structure of bone and muscle,
the delicacies of eyes,
moist, tender mouth,
softened crispness of hair,
moist, tender gash of a mouth.

Catch and Release

Scrambling along the hillside,
 branches sticking my knees, my shins bloodied
 with the stalks of wild roses, I look for fish. The joy
 of gripping a log on a steep hillside,
 the moment of panic crossing a log over the river,
 crossing a downed tree, the swirling motion of the water
 dizzying, unstable, confusing the eye from the wood footing.

And the water holes, the deep fish in there,
 looking to them for the invitation to hunt in the dark
 crevices.

Hunting over the water, thinking like a fly, a caddis, a
 wulff.

To think the way a fly looks, to imitate but with more
 effort,
 more soul than mere imitation.

Then the second,
 the pull, the sheer pleasure of lifting the fish to the
 body.

The jerk, the spasmodic pull of it
 and the small, slick trout, pink freckled and iridescent
 in flight, swings above the river, up to, across to a belly
 or

thigh, relaxing it, catching it bare in the hand this time
 and the pain of unhooking it. A hook lodged,
 metal lodged in its mouth, through its upper jaw or eye,
 and suddenly my scrambling, plotting and dipping into its
 pool

seems a cruel thing.

I am stopped,
 this fish thrashing between my open palm and leg,
 at my capacity to maim something.
 The pleasure of feeling its light body
 snap the line tight, that rainbow body dripping and flexing,
 twisting above the river,
 I cannot unhook myself from it.

I lightly move the base of the hook as if I could free
 this fish with kindness. With my small-boned hands,
 I am gently killing it.
 Its gills, blood tinged, move less rapidly.

I yank the murderous hook hard with my once soft fingers;
 the fish flies down to the sandy bottomed stream.

Moving

I drive too slowly
through neighborhoods with trees.
With all my boxes ready,
I want to believe old china teacups
and dried flowers hide unbroken
in the linen. But when I lift them
I hear the boxes scratching.
The tablecloth from our first Christmas
wants out. The photo
from our second anniversary
jumps around in search of a coffeetable.
One silver candlestick
moans like a high-pitched wind
for the mate it left behind.
I leave them all
held in the grey damp of my sister's basement,
leave behind the year I bought underwear as I went along,
studied poetry in a borrowed bed,
and heard my youngest niece chasing
imaginary horses across the wooden floor above me.

Rules

It was a four and a half second impact,
a silver bumper along
my side of the car.
A moment wrapped in the looseness
and snap of air.
I was held together by
a black nylon ribbon.
I live with a bruised diagonal between my breasts,
a birthmark I recognize this new body by.

Months of physical therapy, of drugs, and
I am still learning the rules.
"You cannot sit without a hard stiffness
settling in your back."
"Torn neck muscles never fully heal."
"You cannot carry a grocery bag in your left arm..."
Apples fell that day, half a dozen
red waxy ones. They rolled like slick
billiard balls as the dull
paper bag dropped to the floor.
I kicked the apples hard against
the sliding glass doors
each splattering open, white
pulp against the glass.

I lay still the day the therapist worked the muscles
under my shoulder blade, lifting
the blade even farther from my body
than nerve damage had already moved it.

I lay still the day the therapist reached under my shoulder
blade from the front, her tough hands
slipping along my left breast
through me to my back. There are rules about when to cry
in the car outside the clinic,
over apples.

At night, alone with my body,
my spine keeps me awake.
Muscle spasms pull it to one side
or the other, it twists
trying to wear the cord away.
I get up then, gravity less harsh
than the weight of my body on itself.
I test my left hand

to see if sleep has robbed me of anything,
the broken nerves beginning to curl back
from my fingertips to my spine
growing back then, a millimeter a day.
The commands that beat so loudly in my head,
my left hand barely hears but still holds
the heavy grey mug of tea
for another morning.
I sit again at my small wooden table,
my shoulder blade catches
against the chair, wants
to be left behind.

Wing

The long thoracic nerve
snakes its way from my spinal column
beneath my left shoulder blade,
along my arm and down
to my finger tips.
My long thoracic nerve will never
regenerate.

The seconds,
when the body is cradled
in that moment of impact,
the air holds head, torso, limbs
suspended like a yolk
in the white of air.
The head jerks forward.
The face and steering wheel
recognize each other.
The door kicks in,
the windows crumble, the wheel well
collapses and the face
keeps moving towards the white-knuckled grip
of the steering wheel.
The black ribbon of belt feeds out
and out until its own metal teeth catch it
and purple bruises blush across the chest.
The white column of neck arcs to upright,
and the necessary swing tears the thick trapeziod,
the delicate white of the joint
connecting the angular collar bone and the arm,
and that beautiful, firing, long thoracic nerve,
its skin ruffled up,
its luminescent conduction flaking
and falling among the stunned back muscles,
and months and years later, the left shoulder blade
still isn't held in place, floating farther
and farther from the body.

I run across the early green of my neighbor's lawn,
holding everything in the heartbeat of my fist.
I move quickly down the street,
my shoulder blade winging,
like it's stopped mid-air.